



Between the Cracks: State Attorney race likely to get ugly early

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There is not yet a named candidate on the ballot against incumbent State Attorney Steve Meadows.

By most accounts, though, there will be one soon. Speculation has that it will be Circuit Judge **Glenn Hess**.

The prediction is this will get ugly, even by Bay County standards.

And that's a lot, given the nature of the contentious 2004 campaign between Meadows and challenger Martha "Sister" Blackmon-Milligan. Meadows prevailed in a close race in which the candidates raised more than \$400,000 combined. With more than 120,000 votes cast, Meadows received about 3,500 more than Blackmon-Milligan.

The 2004 campaign was marked by attempts on both sides to pass on information deemed detrimental to the opponent. It was marked by negative campaigning, political action groups, and money funneled into accounts that danced around campaign financial rules.

It was marked by the use of soft money, like \$135,000 that was used — by a group Meadows said he had no affiliation with — to produce negative ads about Blackmon-Milligan

Meadows' campaign for re-election already has raised some \$156,000. Out of Florida's 20 judicial circuits, only candidates in three circuits (Broward County/Miami, Duval County/Jacksonville and St. Augustine) have raised more.

Pensacola's state attorney has raised nothing, and State Attorney Willie Meggs in Tallahassee loaned himself \$500.

The race for State Attorney, with the history of this circuit, bears monitoring. It is too important.

The News Herald plans continuing, in-depth coverage of this race. We'll look at who is contributing, how much and what that might mean. We'll look at where the money is spent, and what that might mean. We'll report on how the candidates conduct themselves and their campaigns. In the end, we expect we will have spent more time and resources covering this race than any other in the last two decades.

It's that important, and the choices likely will be as clear as the differences between Meadows and **Hess**.

If you like the way things are going, Meadows is your man. Some saw him as relief from longtime incumbent Jim Appleman, who, after reading this today, will break into a grin, grab a cold beverage, hit the links and thank God he's no longer in what is pretty much a thankless job.

Meadows is known for his bluntness and for showing his passion, and he's developed some wellreceived DVDs, including a moving one regarding drunken driving. He's not one to sit back; he's a pusher for justice as he sees it.

Some who voted for Meadows may think that not only did things not improve, they got worse.

If you want change, and **Hess** is the only challenger, then he is your man. The question will be: What kind of change do you want? Do you want the known or the unknown?

Hess is known for his easy-to-interpret rulings that can be deciphered without migraines blooming. He's also known for sticking to his guns when it comes to big interests, and while he's direct, he tends to come at you without the emotion of the moment hanging on his face.

He's more of a wordsmith who also is an effective pusher, only his words are at work, not physical signals.

And he nixed a proposed condo last week, surely an unpopular move in these parts, but that's what he did.

In the upcoming months we'll monitor this race, and hope we're not being presumptuous with the speculation on **Hess**.

Meadows has an advantage as the incumbent, in that he has a healthy start on fund raising. It's a disadvantage, too, in that he undergoes earlier scrutiny on his expenditures. The refund of \$500 to former FDLE Commissioner/former Bay County Sheriff/former SAO investigator Guy Tunnell popped up and received coverage.

There was an expenditure, too, to Public Concepts, LLC, which one could interpret to mean this race may get ugly early.

Public Concepts describes itself on its Web site as "a full service communications, public affairs, grassroots, and political consulting firm. Our primary focus is to assist clients in developing and executing an effective program for achieving their political, communication, and marketing goals."

Lucy Morgan, the St. Petersburg Times Pulitzer Prize-winning Senior Correspondent, wrote that Public Concepts founder Randy Nielsen "proudly wears the mantle: the state's foremost expert on attack ads." Nielsen was targeted by State Rep. Paige V. Kreegel, R-Punta Gorda, who accused Nielsen and others of making "malicious false statements in last-minute campaign ads in his southwest Florida district in 2004," Morgan wrote on Sept. 5.

The Florida Election Commission did not pursue the allegations, saying no laws were violated.

Hess, or whoever runs, also will be required to keep tabs on how they are paying, and they will be scrutinized as well.

We'll soon see if this is going to shape into a hardfought campaign based on the history and work performance of the candidates, or simply one in which no laws are broken.